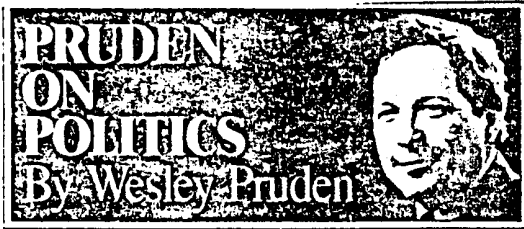


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Can this gaffe turn it around?

Can this be the Reagan gaffe heard all through the press plane, turning the election around for Fighting Fritz?

Over the next day or so — until Walter Mondale finds Issue No. 17 — the reporters following the campaign, and who are bored by it all, will try to make it so.

The Gaffe Editor at the Associated Press characterized yesterday's reaction as "the congressional outcry." In fact, it was the outcry of Democrats in Congress — and for whom out-crying is perfectly appropriate.

Mr. Reagan, replying to a question from a student at Bowling Green University in Ohio about whether embassy security around the world should be strengthened in the wake of the suicide bombing of an embassy annex in east Beirut, said this:

"The real protection and where we're feeling the effects today of the near destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years — before we came here, the effort that somehow to say, well, spying is somehow dishonest and let's get rid of our intelligence agents, and we did that to a large extent."

The outcry was led by Jimmy Carter.

Mr. Carter, who is contributing to the Mondale campaign by keeping a decent distance from it, said the president's statement was "personally insulting" and "completely false."

Rep. Edward P. Boland of Massachusetts, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, says it might even be Mr. Reagan's fault for not doing something about the mess he inherited.

"If there are shortcomings on terrorism," he said, "they are the shortcomings of this administration, which has had four years to solve any problems."

Stansfield Turner, who was Mr. Carter's director of the CIA, suggests the fault for the Beirut bombing might be William Casey, "whose personal financial dealings have been called into question."

Even Fighting Fritz is getting into it. The president's statement, he said, "is inexcusable. He should stand up and say he is responsible."

What is astonishing about the furor — perhaps the most exciting day on the campaign since the president kissed Minnie Pearl at the Grand Ole Opry — is that the out-crying congressional Democrats are trying to paint Jimmy Carter, of all people, as the tough guy who stood against the mob when it wanted to weaken the CIA.

Even the White House seemed to back away from a fight with the man who single-handedly conquered the killer rabbit.

White House aides told reporters traveling with the president in Ohio that it was, in fact, the Carter administration he was talking about. Larry Speakes, the president's press spokesman, said no one was authorized to say that.

"There have been representations in the media that indicated that the president was putting this matter, the blame, entirely on the Carter administration," Mr. Speakes told reporters yesterday. "Did the president say that? Answer: No. Whoever told you that didn't know what they were talking about, period."

Mr. Reagan was talking about the Ford administration, too, he said.

It's medium bizarre that anyone could argue with the premise that in "the post-Watergate period," which ended with the Reagan presidency, the intelligence agencies, like the military establishment, were allowed to run down.

Many of the Democrats pursuing their outcry yesterday were often among those who pushed the notion that spying was "bad," trying to make nice with U.S. foes was "good."

The CIA, during this period became the favorite villain in the fever swamps of the lefties and the liberals, much as unseen "commies" were the villains in the fever swamps of the paranoid right in an earlier time.

But this time out-crying is not likely to be effective, because — unless all the auguries and signposts are wrong — this election isn't about gaffes. The voters do not seem to be looking to catch up the candidates in verbal missteps, such as whether the Republican knows where the Iron Curtain falls, or the whether the Democrat can contain the lust in his heart.

This one is about authenticity, and who holds the authentic view of what Americans want their country and their president to be. They can judge for themselves who it was who wanted to applaud, if not participate, when the CIA was being trashed.

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